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LOST COMMANDO

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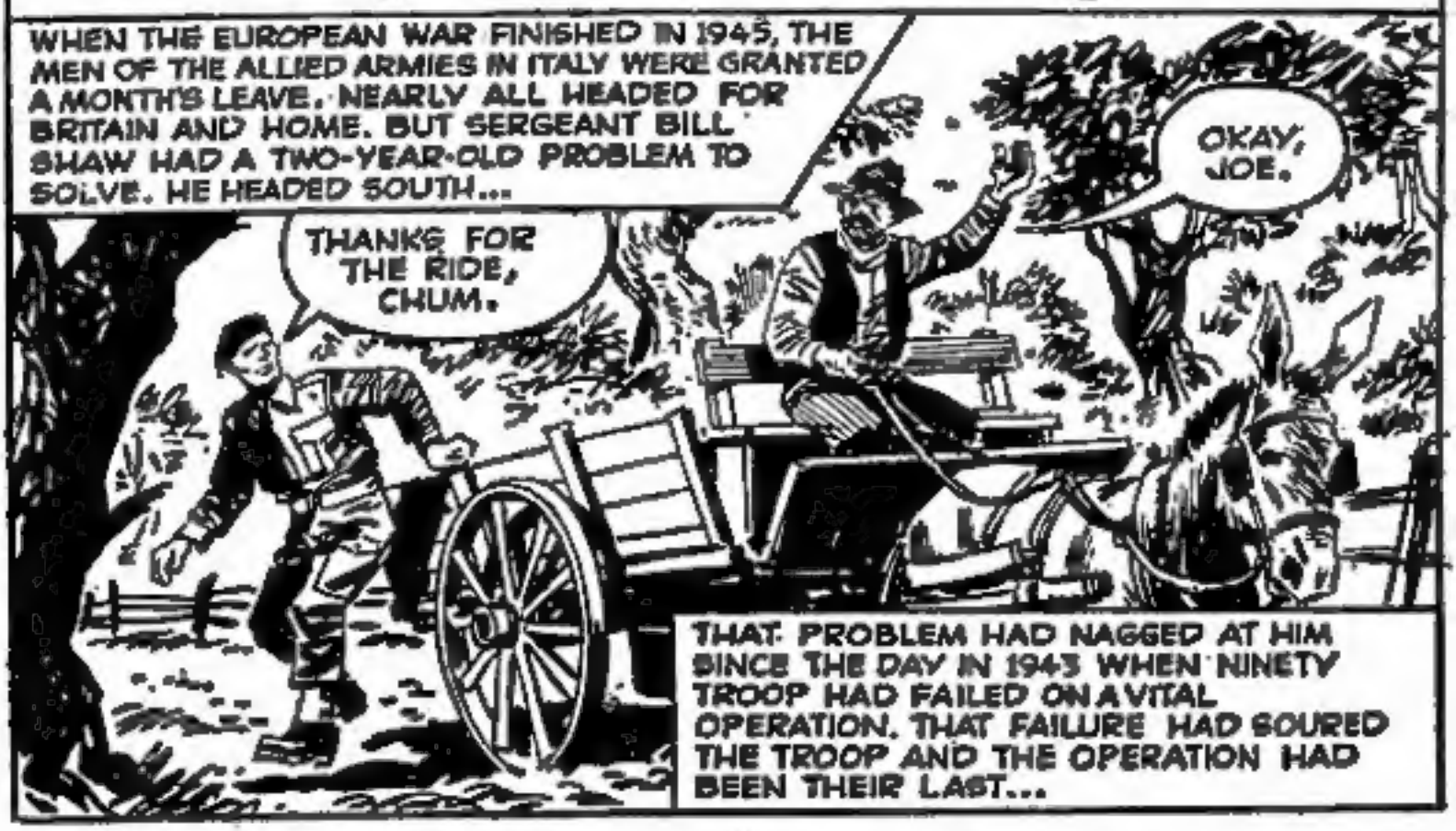
Chapter 1. Violent Night



THE MEMORIES OF THAT BITTER NIGHT RUSHED IN ON SERGEANT BILL SHAW. HE REMEMBERED WITH EXTRA VIVIDNESS, COLONEL RANKIN, FOR WHOSE SAKE SHAW HAD RETURNED...

COLONEL RANKIN SMASHED THE REPUTATION OF OUR COMMANDO TROOP—AND HIS OWN REPUTATION, TOO. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ODD ABOUT IT ALL, *SOMETHING NOT QUITE RIGHT...*

COLONEL RANKIN WAS THE FIERY LEADER WHO HAD BROUGHT THEM SUCCESSFULLY THROUGH FIFTY ACTIONS. THE *ARMY* HAD CONDEMNED THE COLONEL AS A BLUNDERER, A WEAKLING, AND A COWARD...

I *KNEW* COLONEL RANKIN! HE WAS NEVER ANY OF THE THINGS. THEY CALLED HIM! *SOMETHING* HAPPENED HERE THAT NIGHT, SOMETHING VERY STRANGE...

THE COILS OF TIME UNWOUND AS SERGEANT BILL SHAW SAT BROODING ON THAT SICILIAN HILL TOP...
THE ASSAULT CRAFT WERE BEING LOWERED INTO THE WATER. CORPORAL TIM FRASER, WHO WAS TO DIE VIOLENTLY THAT NIGHT, SPOKE AGAIN...
ALL QUIET, BILL. IF THE JERRIES ARE THERE, THEY CAN'T HAVE SEEN US YET.
THEY'LL BE THERE! THEY'VE TAKEN OVER FROM THE EYTIES ALL ALONG THIS COAST...
LCI

DARKNESS SHROUDED THE ASSAULT LANDING SHIP AS SHE LOWERED HER SMALL CRAFT. QUIETLY, AND WITH PERFECT DISCIPLINE, THE COMMANDOS DROPPED INTO THEIR PLACES.
NO TALKING, NOW! THE OFFICERS WILL BE HERE DIRECTLY.

THE OFFICERS OF THE COMMANDO GROUP WERE FULLY BRIEFED, AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR VARIOUS MISSIONS AND IMPATIENT TO GO.
YOU'VE DRAWN A LULU, JACK! JUST TWO LOVELY GUNS TO KNOCK OFF ~ BUT IT MUST BE DONE BEFORE THE MAIN FORCE GOES IN! I ALMOST WISH I'D ATTACHED MYSELF TO 'A' COMPANY!
YOU'RE WELCOME TO JOIN US, COLONEL, ANY TIME!

CAPTAIN JACK PURTON, IN COMMAND OF "A" COMPANY, ADMIRED AND RESPECTED COLONEL RANKIN, AS DID ALL THE MEN OF THE TOUGH COMMANDO.
THE COLONEL'S COMING WITH THE OTHER COMPANIES, JACK. WE'VE GOT A REAL TARGET~ THE RADIO DETECTOR HEADQUARTERS~AND IT'S HEAVILY GUARDED. WE MOVE IN AN HOUR AFTER YOU, COME WHAT MAY.
YEAH~ YOU NEED THE COLONEL ALONG TO HOLD YOUR HAND.
NOW, NOW, CHILDREN! I HONESTLY WISH I COULD BE WITH EVERY SINGLE COMPANY TONIGHT~BUT I'LL BE AROUND!

LAUGHING QUIETLY, RELISHING THE GRIM WORK AHEAD, THE OFFICERS JOINED THEIR COMPANIES.
ALL READY TO CAST OFF, SIR.
RIGHT, SARNT. PUSH OFF!

THE ASSAULT CRAFT CARRYING "A" COMPANY. LEFT THE PARENT SHIP, FORMED UP AND HEADED FOR THE BEACH. EYES STRAINED TO PICK UP THE SINGLE RED LIGHT THAT WOULD GUIDE THEM IN.
THERE IT IS, SIR!
LOOKS ABOUT RIGHT. THOSE SUBMARINE BOYS KNOW THEIR STUFF, ALL RIGHT, WE'LL GO IN ON THAT LIGHT AS A MARK!

TENSELY, THE MEN OF THE COMMANDO WAITED FOR THE SMASHING BLAST OF FIRE THAT WOULD GREET THEM AS THEY PLOUGHED IN THROUGH THE SHALLOWS.

BUT THE NIGHT BROODED ON IN DARKNESS AND SILENCE SAVE FOR THE LAP OF THE WAVES AND THE RASPING BREATH OF THE MEN AS THEY LEAPT FROM THE ASSAULT CRAFT AND RACED UP THE BEACH...
CORPORAL FRASER—TAKE YOUR POINT PARTY OUT SHARPISH!
ON OUR WAY, SIR!

LIEUTENANTS LANCE CROCKER AND HARRY KLINE HUDDLED WITH CAPTAIN JACK PURTON ON THE EDGE OF THE BEACH. ALL AROUND THE NIGHT BREATHED SOFTLY AND QUIETLY— AND THEN...
SOMEONE'S CATCHING IT!
HANG IT! FRASER'S POINT PARTY MUST HAVE BUMPED INTO SOMEONE! WE'D BETTER MOVE UP TO SUPPORT THEM.

AS THE REST OF "A" COMPANY NEARED THE BASE OF THE HILL FROM WHICH THE GERMAN SPANDAU BEAT OUT ITS DEVIL'S TATTOO, ANOTHER MACHINE GUN CAUGHT THEM IN ENFILADE ...
DOWN, EVERYBODY! HIT COVER! SEE IF YOU CAN PINPOINT THAT JERRY, SERGEANT.
RIGHT, SIR.

THE RAID'S TIMETABLE HAD BEEN DRASTICALLY OVERTURNED. UNLESS THE SPANDAU WAS SILENCED, "A" COMPANY WOULD BE BOGGED DOWN UNTIL THE MAIN ASSAULT PARTY LANDED — IF IT EVER GOT THAT FAR!
IT'S STRAIGHT AHEAD, SIR. JUST BEYOND THOSE TREES.

WITH ENEMY BULLETS FLYING VICIOUSLY ALL ROUND HIM, SERGEANT SHAW MADE A DASH UP THE HILL...
ONE PINEAPPLE - COMING UP!
RIGHT, LADS! ON YOUR FEET...

THE SERGEANT'S GRENADE LOBBED IN WITH DEADLY ACCURACY...

HARD ON THE BLAST, CROCKER AND SHAW TOOK THEIR MEN IN WITH A WILD RUSH...
ACHTUNG! KOMMANDO!

MOVING WITH DESPERATE URGENCY, THE COMMANDOS ROLLED UP THE GERMAN DEFENCE LIKE A PIECE OF LINOLEUM...
WELL DONE, CROCKER NOW WE MUST GET ON! THOSE BIG GUNS MUST BE SCUPPERED AND WE CAN STILL DO IT IN TIME!
THERE SHOULDN'T BE ANY MORE OPPOSITION HERE, SIR WE CAN GO STRAIGHT THROUGH NOW.

BUT THE LIEUTENANT'S OPTIMISM WAS MISPLACED THEY HAD ONLY GONE A FEW STEPS, WHEN A HAIL OF GERMAN BULLETS SPLATTERED THEM WITH EARTH. THEN CAME THE DEEP BARK OF A HEAVIER GUN.
PHEW! THAT WAS TOO CLOSE FOR MY LIKING! SOUNDED LIKE A TANK GUN, TOO, SIR!

"A" COMPANY RETURNED THE FIRE BUT THE GERMANS WERE WELL DUG-IN AND MADE DIFFICULT TARGETS.
LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE HULL DOWN ON OUR LINE OF ADVANCE, KLINE!
WE'VE GOT TO GET AT THEM SOMEHOW, SIR, OR THE WHOLE OPERATION WILL BE A FLOP!
THE ONLY WAY IS TO SEND CROCKER AND SHAW BACK DOWN THE HILL TO TRY AND FIND A WAY ROUND THE JERRIES' POSITION —OR EVEN TO SILENCE IT, IF THEY CAN!
IT MIGHT MEAN THE LIVES OF TWO OF HIS BEST MEN, BUT CAPTAIN PURTON KNEW IT WAS A RISK HE MUST TAKE.
IF YOU CAN GET THEM WITH A COUPLE OF GRENADES—WE'LL FOLLOW YOU UP.
RIGHT, SIR.

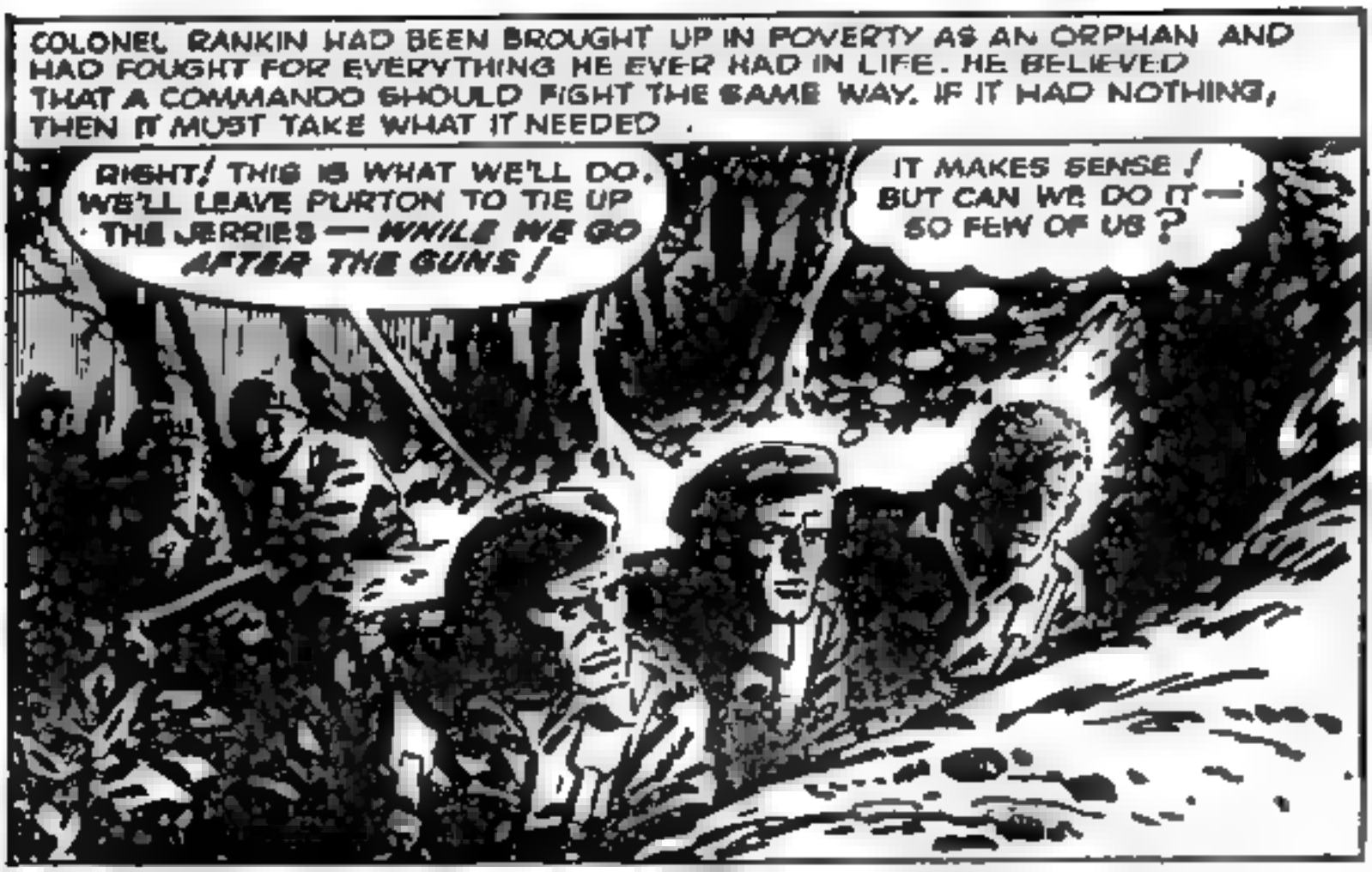
CROCKER AND SHAW CRAWLED AWAY FROM THE COMPANY UNDER A CURTAIN OF SUPPORTING FIRE ...

BUT THEY HAD ONLY GONE A FEW YARDS WHEN THEY SAW THE TAIL-END OF A PATROL...
HOLD IT, SERGEANT — THERE'S SOME MEN JUST IN FRONT OF US — MUST BE JERRIES! LET'S FOLLOW THEM — THEY MIGHT LEAD US ANOTHER WAY TO THE GUNS.
BETTER BE CAREFUL, SIR. WE WON'T STAND AN EARTHLY IF THEY SEE US!

THEY HAD FOLLOWED THE DIM FIGURES FOR ABOUT A HUNDRED YARDS, WHEN...
WHO GOES THERE?
COMMANDO!
GOOD GRIEF! IT'S OUR OWN LADS!

THEY BREATHED AGAIN AS THEY RAN OVER TO THE COMMANDO...
WHO'S YOUR LEADER, TROOPER?
COLONEL RANKIN, SIR.

AT THAT MOMENT, THE COLONEL CAME BACK WITH THE REST OF HIS SMALL PATROL...
CROCKER! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? WHAT'S HAPPENED TO 'A' COMPANY AND CAPTAIN PURTON?
THEY'RE PINNED DOWN, SIR THE CAPTAIN SENT US OUT TO TRY AND GET BEHIND THE JERRIES...

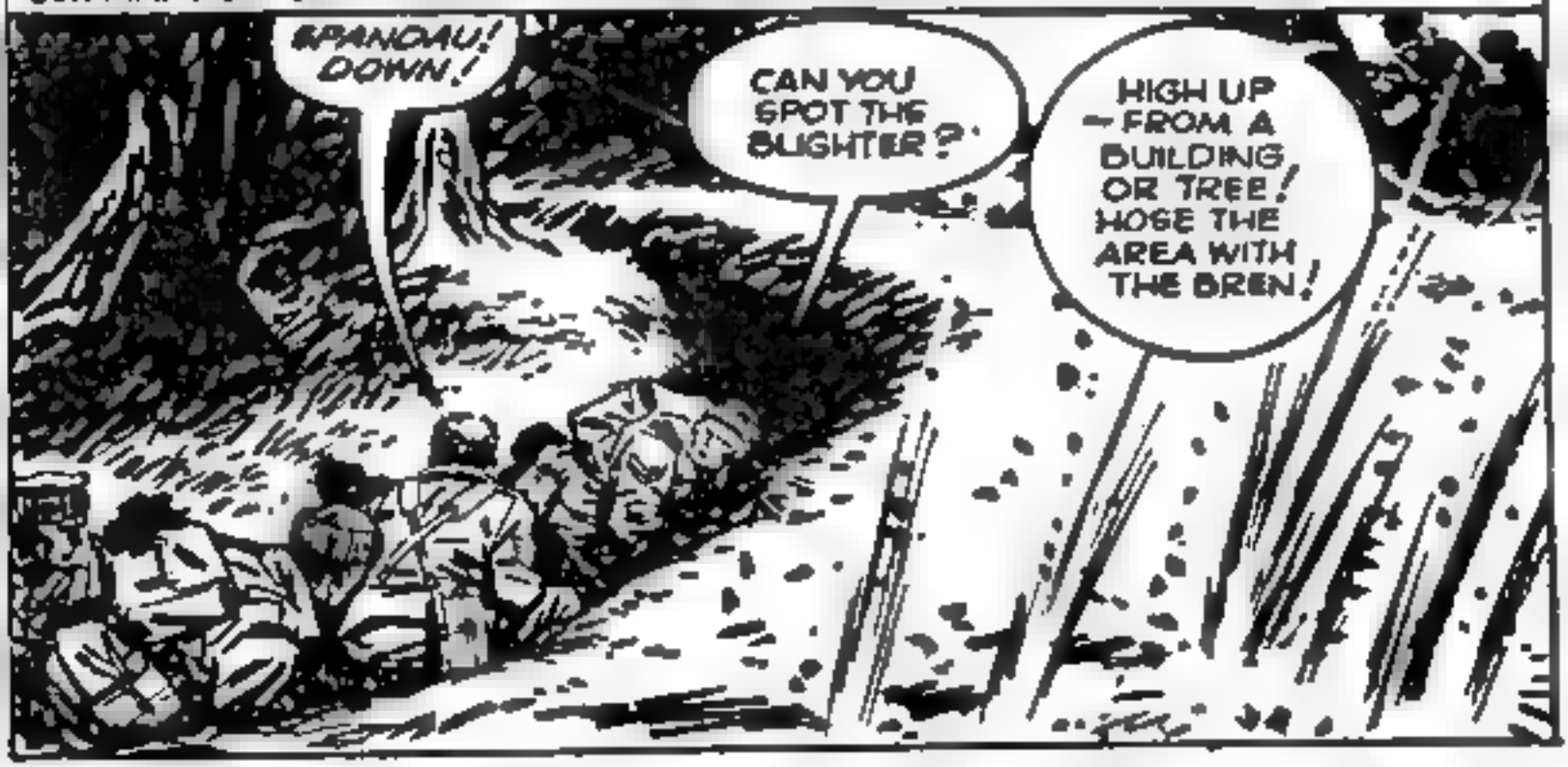

COLONEL RANKIN HAD BEEN BROUGHT UP IN POVERTY AS AN ORPHAN AND HAD FOUGHT FOR EVERYTHING HE EVER HAD IN LIFE. HE BELIEVED THAT A COMMANDO SHOULD FIGHT THE SAME WAY. IF IT HAD NOTHING, THEN IT MUST TAKE WHAT IT NEEDED.
RIGHT! THIS IS WHAT WE'LL DO. WE'LL LEAVE PURTON TO TIE UP THE JERRIES — WHILE WE GO AFTER THE GUNS!
IT MAKES SENSE! BUT CAN WE DO IT — SO FEW OF US?

WITHOUT MORE ADO, RANKIN SENT A RUNNER TO CAPTAIN PURTON AND LED HIS MEN INLAND. BUT THEY HAD NOT GONE FAR WHEN...
HELLO! WHO'S THAT?
COMMANDO!
COMMANDO!

CORPORAL FRASER, SIR – POINT PARTY WE SLIPPED THROUGH THE JERRY LINE, BUT FROM WHAT WE CAN HEAR, THE REST OF THE COMPANY GOT SNARLED UP WITH IT.
THAT'S RIGHT, CORPORAL! WE'RE GOING TO HIT THOSE JERRY GUNS OURSELVES – SO I CAN USE YOU AND YOUR MEN.

Chapter 2. Vanished Without Trace

CAUGHT UP IN THE FIERCE ENTHUSIASM GENERATED BY COLONEL RANKIN, THE COMMANDOS STRODE OUT BUT THE ENEMY DEFENCES WERE IN DEPTH...



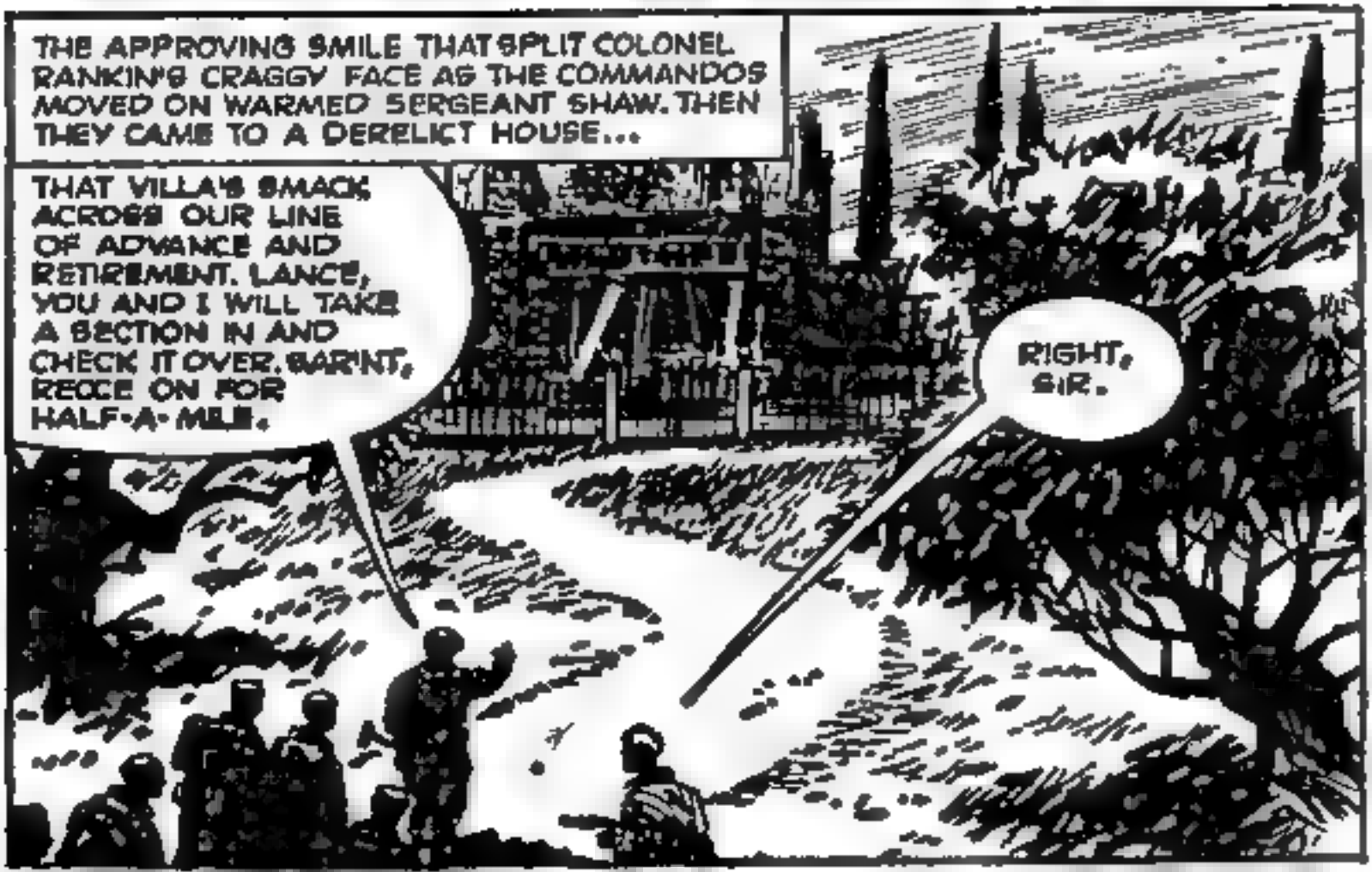
THE BREN SQUIRTED SAVAGELY IN ANSWER BUT STILL THE ENEMY MACHINE GUN CLATTERED SPITEFULLY.

COLONEL RANKIN WAS AS DEADLY CALM AS EVER AND THE MEN TOOK HEART.

WHILE THE COMMANDOS ENGAGED THE ATTENTION OF THE GERMANS WITH BREN AND RIFLE FIRE, SERGEANT SHAW WENT FORWARD ALONE HE SOON FOUND THE ENEMY STRONGPOINT...
TOO MANY OF THEM TO TAKE WITH ONE BURST—ONLY ONE THING FOR IT—A GRENADE!

SHAW KNEW IT WOULD ONLY BE SECONDS BEFORE THE GUN CREW SAW HIM. HE COULD NOT AFFORD TO MISS...
RIGHT, YOU BEAUTIES! COUNT FOUR AND—

-DIE!


THE APPROVING SMILE THAT SPLIT COLONEL RANKIN'S CRAGGY FACE AS THE COMMANDOS MOVED ON WARMED SERGEANT SHAW. THEN THEY CAME TO A DERELICT HOUSE...
THAT VILLA'S SMACK ACROSS OUR LINE OF ADVANCE AND RETIREMENT. LANCE, YOU AND I WILL TAKE A SECTION IN AND CHECK IT OVER. SARN'T, RECCE ON FOR HALF-A-MILE.
RIGHT, SIR.

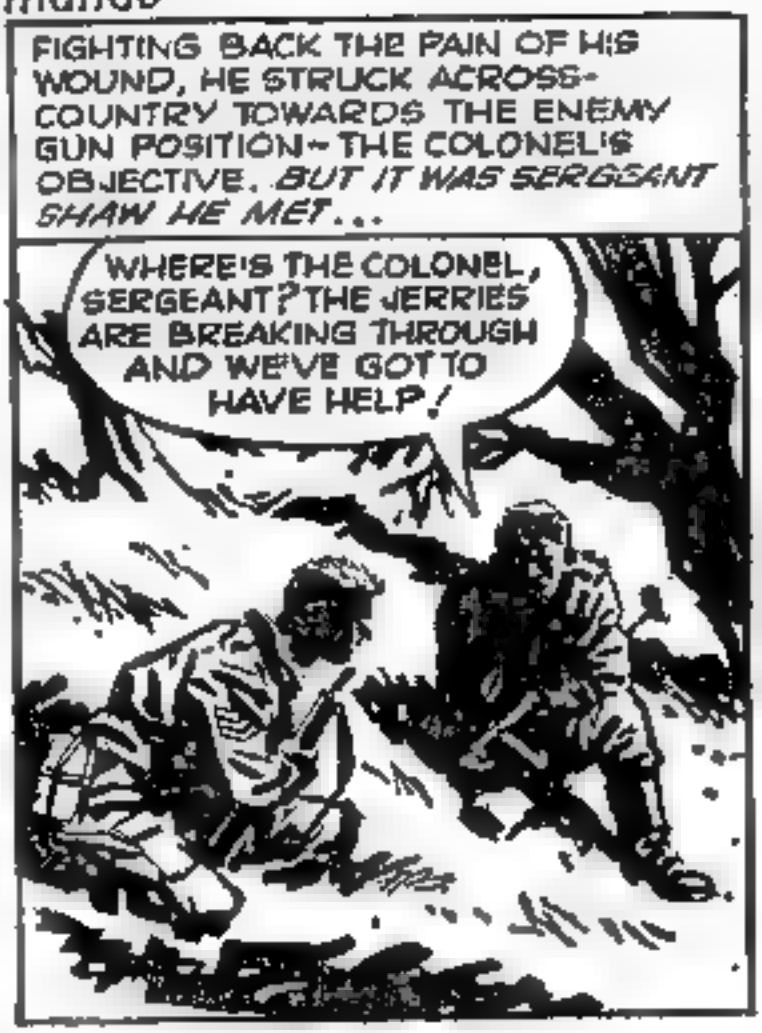
AS THE PARTIES SPLIT, EVERY MAN KNEW THEY MIGHT BE SAYING FAREWELL FOR THE LAST TIME...
IF THERE ARE JERRIES IN THAT VILLA, THEY'RE HEADING FOR TROUBLE, SARGE.
THAT'S THE COLONEL'S WAY ~ TAKING THE TOUGH JOBS HIMSELF.

MEANWHILE, THE DEFENDERS OF THAT STRETCH OF COAST HAD BEEN THOROUGHLY AROUSED PANZERS HAD ALREADY BEEN CALLED INTO ACTION TO CHALLENGE THE PENETRATION OF "A" COMPANY.
THE ENGLANDER KOMMANDOS ARE IN FOR MORE TROUBLE THAN THEY EXPECTED, I THINK.
JA! YOU FLUSH THEM OUT AND WE'LL FINISH THEM OFF!

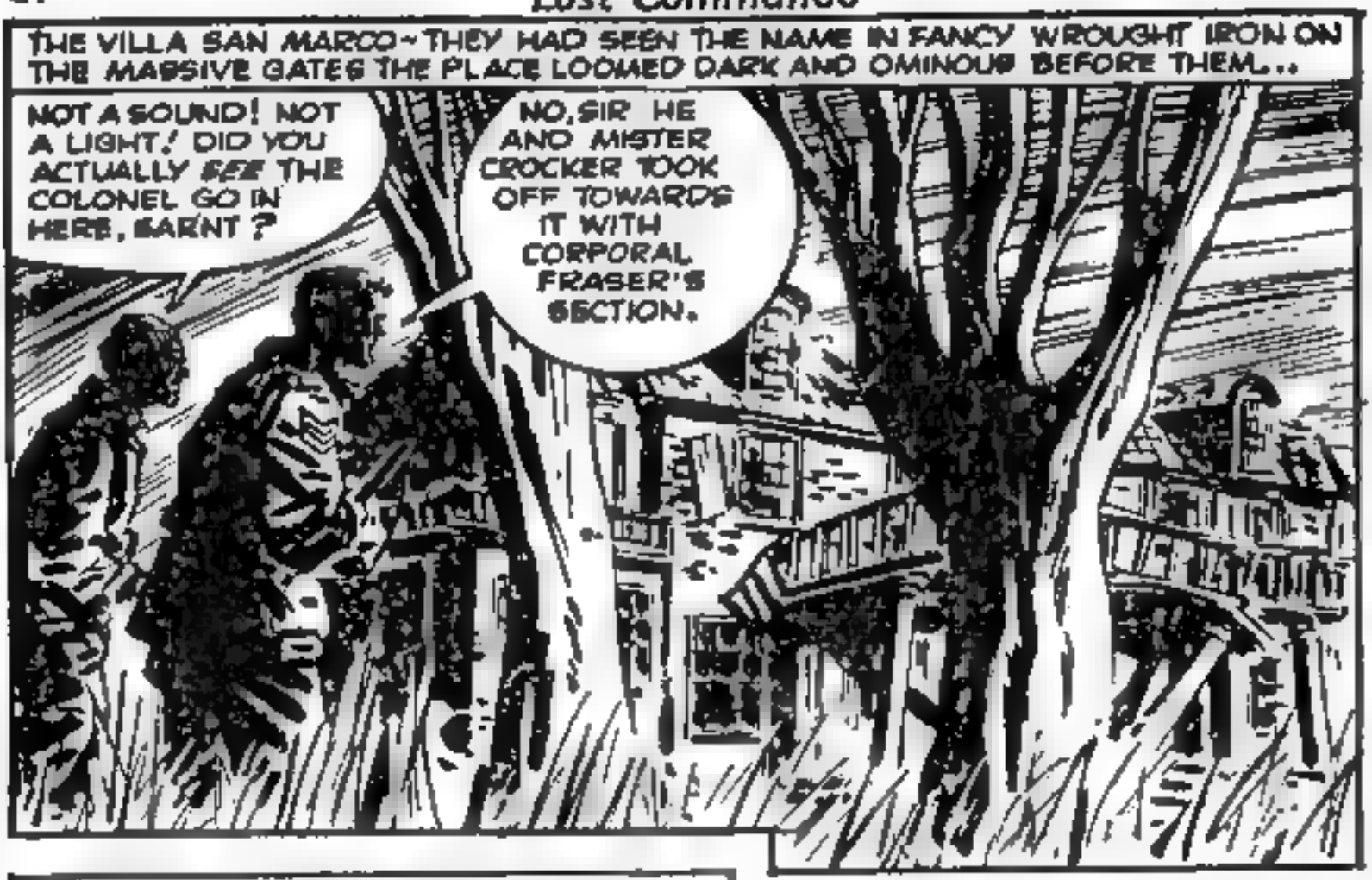
CONFIDENT THAT THEIR HEAVY WEAPONS WOULD OBLITERATE THE LIGHTLY-ARMED BRITISH, THE NAZIS THRUST VICIOUSLY AND "A" COMPANY WAS FORCED TO FALL BACK...
WE'LL HAVE TO GET WORD TO THE COLONEL, HARRY. WE MIGHT RETRIEVE THE SITUATION IF WE CAN BRING UP REINFORCEMENTS...
I'LL GO, SIR. THE COLONEL'S BOUND TO ORGANISE SOMETHING...

AS LIEUTENANT HARRY KLINE RACED THROUGH THE GAUNTLET OF FIRE, HE FELT THAT THE FATE OF HIS WHOLE COMPANY DEPENDED UPON HIM REACHING THE COLONEL.
GOT TO GET THROUGH~OR WE'RE DONE FOR!

NO MAN COULD HAVE BROKEN THROUGH THAT NAZI RING OF STEEL UNSCATHED BUT, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS HIT, LIEUTENANT KLINE KEPT GOING...


FIGHTING BACK THE PAIN OF HIS WOUND, HE STRUCK ACROSS-COUNTRY TOWARDS THE ENEMY GUN POSITION~THE COLONEL'S OBJECTIVE. *BUT IT WAS SERGEANT SHAW HE MET...*
WHERE'S THE COLONEL, SERGEANT? THE JERRIES ARE BREAKING THROUGH AND WE'VE GOT TO HAVE HELP!

BILL SHAW EXPLAINED WHAT HAD HAPPENED AND LIEUTENANT KLINE MADE THE DECISION...
WE'LL GO TO THIS VILLA YOU MENTION~ AND FIND THE COLONEL. MAYBE HE CAN DRUM UP SOME HELP.
RIGHT, SIR!


THE VILLA SAN MARCO~THEY HAD SEEN THE NAME IN FANCY WROUGHT IRON ON THE MASSIVE GATES THE PLACE LOOMED DARK AND OMINOUS BEFORE THEM...
NOT A SOUND! NOT A LIGHT! DID YOU ACTUALLY SEE THE COLONEL GO IN HERE, SARNT?
NO, SIR HE AND MISTER CROCKER TOOK OFF TOWARDS IT WITH CORPORAL FRASER'S SECTION.

ALREADY, THE FIRST FAINT RAYS OF LIGHT WERE TINTING THE SKY. THEN SHAW HEARD THE QUICK CHALLENGE OF ONE OF HIS MEN...
HALT!
COMMANDO! LIEUTENANT CROCKER!

THE TWO LIEUTENANTS MET...
LANCE, WHERE'S THE COLONEL? JACK PURTON'S IN REAL TROUBLE— PANZERS, INFANTRY —THE LOT...
THE COLONEL'S GONE OFF SOMEWHERE..
WE'D BETTER REJOIN CAPTAIN PURTON RIGHT AWAY— THERE'S NOT A HOPE OF GETTING TO THE GUNS NOW.

THEIR ATTACK BLUNTED BY THE STRENGTH OF THE ENEMY DEFENCES, "A" COMPANY HAD BEEN FORCED TO DISENGAGE AND THE LITTLE GROUP JOINED UP WITH CAPTAIN PURTON WITHOUT TOO MUCH DIFFICULTY.
THIS IS AN UNHOLY MESS, GENTLEMEN. WE'LL NEVER BREAK THROUGH TO THE BATTERY NOW.
IF ONLY WE COULD HAVE REACHED COLONEL RANKIN...

CROCKER INTERRUPTED QUICKLY...
THE COLONEL COULD HAVE DONE NOTHING AT THIS STAGE, HARRY. THINGS HAD GONE TOO FAR AGAINST US.
LANCE IS RIGHT! WE MUST MAKE FOR THE BEACH!

THE DIFFICULT DECISION MADE, THE COMMANDOS ACTED ON IT AT ONCE, BUT THE TASTE OF DEFEAT WAS BITTER IN THEIR MOUTHS.
THE FIRST TIME WE'VE FAILED IF ONLY THE COLONEL HADN'T GONE ADRIFT. SOMETHING QUEER ABOUT THAT...

THE MUTUAL TRUST WITHIN A COMMANDO WAS A VITAL AND SUSTAINING STRENGTH, BUT A SEED OF DOUBT HAD BEEN SOWN IN SERGEANT SHAW'S MIND...
WE'RE NOT OUT OF THE WOOD YET LOOK, JERRIES AHEAD, THEY HAVEN'T SPOTTED US.
THEY MUST HAVE BEEN ALERTED ALL ALONG THE COAST BY OUR EFFORT THE MAIN ASSAULT SHOULD BE COMING ASHORE SOON, TOO!

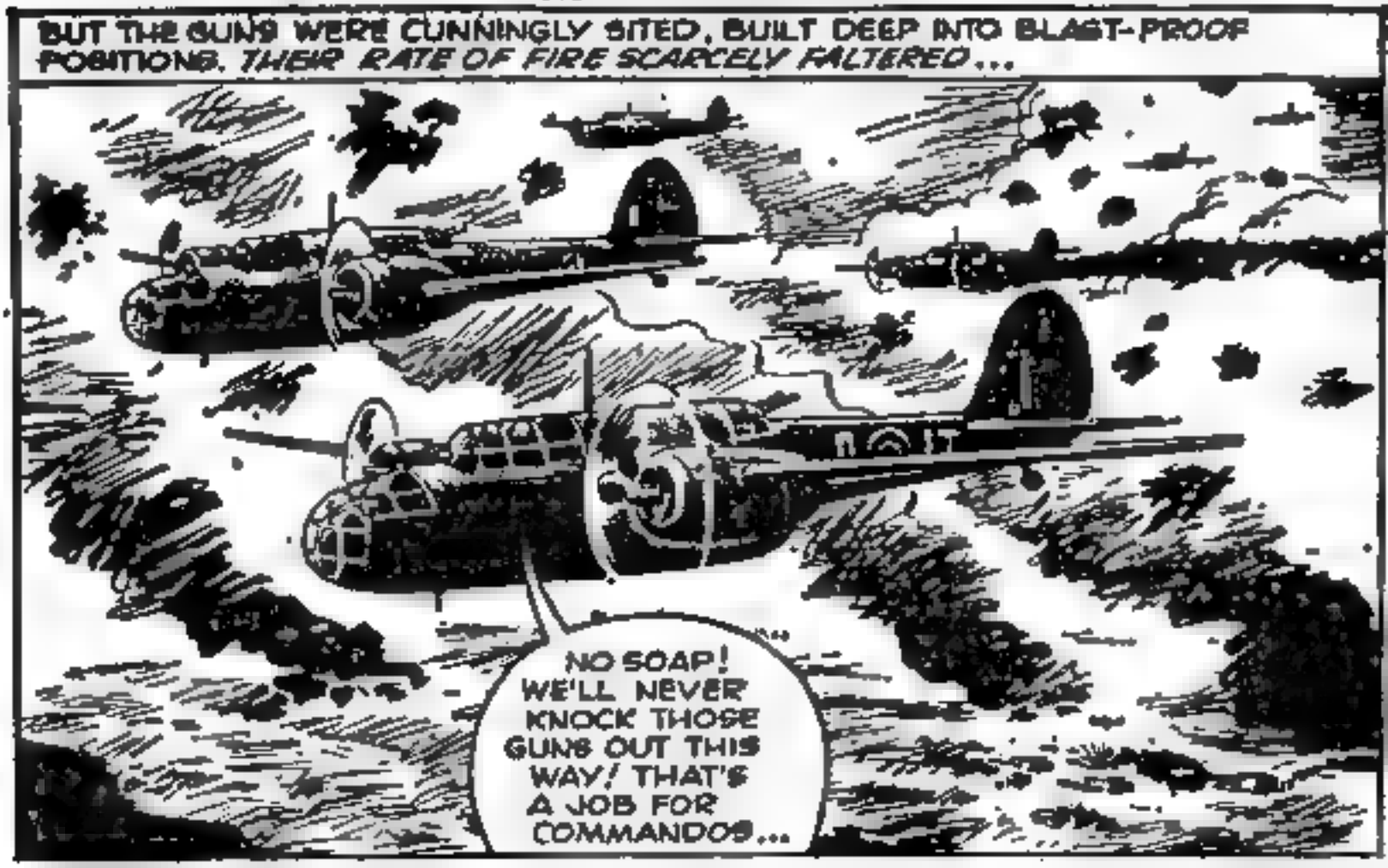
THE MAIN COMMANDO FORCE WAS ALREADY PLOUGHING TOWARDS THAT SECTION OF SICILIAN SHORE, BLITHELY UNAWARE OF THE GUNS WHICH HAD NOT BEEN SILENCED.
I WOULDN'T LIKE TO BE ON THE RECEIVING END OF THIS LITTLE LOT, MATE!

THE ALLIED ARMADA SWEPT INSHORE, JUST ONE SMALL PART OF THE OVERALL INVASION PLAN. BUT THIS PART DID NOT GO ACCORDING TO THAT MASTER PLAN...

THE ASSAULT INFANTRY CURSED AND FLOUNDERED AS THEIR CRAFT WERE PINPOINTED AND SHATTERED BY THE NAZI GUN BATTERY.
WE'RE SITTING DUCKS!
THE COMMANDOS WERE SUPPOSED TO SPIKE THOSE GUNS! THEY'VE FALLEN DOWN ON THE JOB!

THE COMMANDOS HAD FAILED! OTHER MEANS MUST BE FOUND - AND QUICKLY - TO SILENCE THOSE MURDEROUS GUNS.
RAMROD LEADER TO ALL AIRCRAFT. WE'VE GOT TO KNOCK OUT THOSE GUNS! PUT EVERY EGG SMACK ON THE TARGET!
WILCO, RAMROD LEADER.

BRITISH BOMBERS THUNDERED IN OVER THE BATTERY, HARRIED BY VIOLENT ANTI-AIRCRAFT FIRE. THEIR BOMBS BLANKETED THE AREA...


BUT THE GUNS WERE CUNNINGLY SITED, BUILT DEEP INTO BLAST-PROOF POSITIONS. THEIR RATE OF FIRE SCARCELY FALTERED...
NO SOAP! WE'LL NEVER KNOCK THOSE GUNS OUT THIS WAY! THAT'S A JOB FOR COMMANDOS...

AND THE COMMANDOS WHO SHOULD HAVE DONE THE JOB WERE ON THE RUN THROUGH THE SICILIAN COUNTRYSIDE, HUNTED BY A GERMAN DEFENCE ALERT AND ON ITS TOES.
HA! IT IS GOOD TO SEE THE ENGLANDER KOMMANDOS RUN FOR A CHANGE!
JA! THE SWINE HAVE BITTEN OFF TOO MUCH THIS TIME AND IT WILL CHOKE THEM!

AT THAT MOMENT, A NAZI LIEUTENANT HURRIED TOWARDS THE MACHINE GUN CREW...
BREAK OFF THIS ACTION AT ONCE! WE MUST GET TO OUR DEFENCE POSITIONS — THE ENGLANDERS ARE LANDING!
AT ONCE, HERR LEUTNANT!

WITH THE SMOOTH UNFLURRIED MOTIONS OF OLD CAMPAIGNERS, THE GERMAN SPANDAU TEAM DISMANTLED THEIR GUN AND SET OFF FOR THEIR NORMAL DEFENCE POSITIONS. THE LIEUTENANT TURNED TO FOLLOW..
AAGH!

THE WOUNDED GERMAN WRITHED ON THE GROUND IN AGONY, HIS HATE-FILLED MIND SEEKING A WAY OF HITTING BACK AT THE COMMANDOS.
YOU DEVILISH KOMMANDOS MAY HAVE KILLED ME, BUT YOU, TOO, WILL DIE — BETRAYED BY YOUR OWN LEADER!

THE COMMANDOS STARED AT HIM DISBELIEVINGLY...
THE MAN'S RAVING! DELIRIOUS!
IT'S TRUE, I TELL YOU, TRUE! YOUR BRAVE COLONEL RANKIN HAS TURNED TRAITOR!

THEY WERE THE LAST WORDS THE GERMAN UTTERED.
IT CAN'T BE TRUE — YET HE KNEW COLONEL RANKIN'S NAME!
HE COULD HAVE FOUND THAT OUT EASILY ENOUGH...
LIES! ALL LIES! I'LL NEVER BELIEVE THE COLONEL IS A TRAITOR!

SOON, THE MAIN FORCES WERE HITTING THE BEACHES THE GOING WAS HARD. MEN FOUGHT AND DIED IN THEIR EFFORTS TO BATTER A WAY INLAND AGAINST ALERTED DEFENCES.

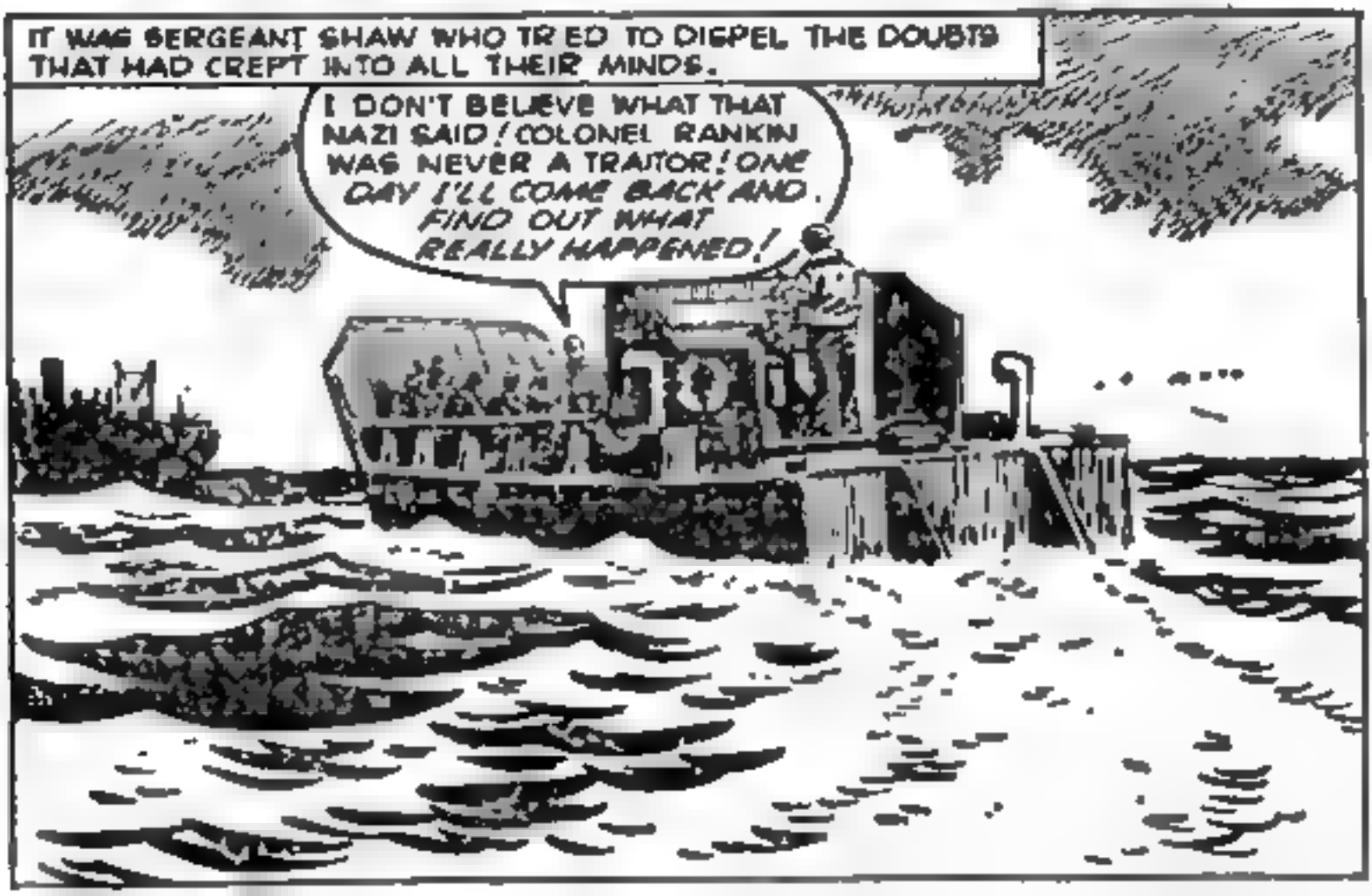
LATER, THAT DAY OF BATTLE, THE SURVIVORS OF "A" COMPANY MET UP WITH AN INFANTRY BATTALION.
WE'VE SEEN NO COMMANDOS APART FROM YOU, CAPTAIN. MY MEN ARE A LITTLE DISILLUSIONED WITH COMMANDOS. WE CAME ASHORE IN FACE OF HEAVY GUNFIRE...
I'M SORRY ABOUT THAT, SIR. WE DID WHAT WE COULD, BUT EVERYTHING WENT WRONG. I'M LOOKING FOR OUR C.O.

THE PREARRANGED PULL OUT AREA FOR THE COMMANDOS WAS NOT AVAILABLE FOR IT HAD NOT EVEN BEEN CAPTURED! WEARILY, PURTON LED HIS MEN BACK TO THE MAIN BEACH.
WAIT THERE AND THE NAVY'LL TAKE YOU OFF SHORTLY...
THAT'S CAPTAIN PURTON OF 'A' COMPANY!
THANK YOU. WELL, CHAPS, MAKE YOURSELVES AT HOME.

IT WAS THERE THAT A LANCE CORPORAL AND TWO TROOPERS JOINED THEM.
YOU SAY YOU THREE ARE ALL THAT ARE LEFT OF 'B' AND 'C' COMPANIES? ALL THE REST...?
WE WERE JUMPED ALL THE WAY, SIR. THE JERRIES SEEMED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT OUR MOVEMENTS THAN WE DID OURSELVES.

CAPTAIN JACK PURTON PUT THE QUESTION THAT WAS TORTURING ALL THE SURVIVORS OF "A" COMPANY.
WHERE IS COLONEL RANKIN? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE COLONEL WHEN YOU WERE OVERRUN?
HE WASN'T WITH US, SIR! WE HADN'T SEEN HIM SINCE JUST AFTER WE LANDED.

SLOW LOOKS OF AMAZEMENT SPREAD OVER THE MEN'S FACES COLONEL RANKIN HAD NOT GONE BACK TO THE MAIN PARTY. THEN WHERE HAD HE GONE?
THE COLONEL DISAPPEARED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RAID. HE MUST HAVE BEEN KILLED! HE COULDN'T HAVE TURNED TRAITOR AS THAT GERMAN OFFICER SAID...
COME ON, YOU COMMANDOS. THE NAVY'S WAITING FOR YOU!


IT WAS SERGEANT SHAW WHO TRIED TO DISPEL THE DOUBTS THAT HAD CREPT INTO ALL THEIR MINDS.
I DON'T BELIEVE WHAT THAT NAZI SAID! COLONEL RANKIN WAS NEVER A TRAITOR! ONE DAY I'LL COME BACK AND FIND OUT WHAT REALLY HAPPENED!

THE FINAL ACT OF THIS PHASE OF THE TRAGEDY WAS PLAYED OUT BY AN INFANTRY PATROL, PROBING TOWARDS THE VILLA SAN MARCO...
WHAT'S UP WITH, STONE? WHY DOESN'T HE KEEP UNDER COVER, THE IDIOT?
HEY, SARN'T! HERE, QUICK!

PRIVATE STONE HAD GOOD REAGON TO BE EXCITED...
COMMANDOS, SARN'T!
SHOT IN THE BACK! ALL OF THEM, CUT DOWN WITHOUT A CHANCE!

THE NEWS FILTERED THROUGH TO THE COMMANDO. SERGEANT SHAW FELT A STAB OF SORROW AT THE LOSS OF GOOD COMRADES, OF CORPORAL TIM FRASER, WHO WOULD NEVER LAUGH AND JOKE AGAIN...
THEY'RE FINDING OUR MEN LYING DEAD ALL OVER THE BATTLEFIELD. BUT TIM FRASER'S PATROL IS THE ONLY ONE SO FAR TO BE FOUND SHOT IN THE BACK!
THEY STILL HAVEN'T FOUND THE COLONEL! I WONDER WHAT DID HAPPEN BACK THERE...?

THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION SEEMED LOST FOR EVER. SERGEANT BILL SHAW SOLDIERED ON, BUT ONE THOUGHT ALWAYS REMAINED WITH HIM.
THE WAR'S NEARLY OVER. IF I COME THROUGH, I WILL GO BACK TO SICILY. SOMEHOW, I'LL REALLY FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO THE COLONEL!

Chapter 3. Villa of Darkness

SERGEANT SHAW HAD COME BACK – BUT HE HAD FOUND NO MORE KNOWLEDGE NOR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED THAT NIGHT OF BATTLE...

LIEUTENANT CROCKER HAD SERVED WITH OTHER UNITS SINCE THAT DISASTROUS NIGHT AND SHAW HAD NOT SEEN HIM. BUT CROCKER COULD KNOW NOTHING.

BILL SHAW'S FOOT STRUCK SOMETHING HARD AND HE SPRANG DOWN CURIOUSLY...
A PILL BOX! BUT IF MISTER CROCKER SCOUTED THIS HILL HE WOULD HAVE SEEN THIS! IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MANNED BY JERRIES! HE SAID THERE WAS NOTHING HERE!
BLAZING CONVICTION HIT BILL SHAW...
CROCKER NEVER SCOUTED THIS HILL! HE COULDN'T HAVE! HE WAS WITH THE COLONEL ALL THE TIME. HE SAW WHAT HAPPENED!

IN THE PASSIONATE HEAT OF HIS DISCOVERY, BILL SHAW SPOKE ALOUD...
TIM FRASER'S PATROL WERE MURDERED! AND THE COLONEL DISAPPEARED! ONLY CROCKER CAME BACK! CROCKER WAS THE TRAITOR! CROCKER MURDERED THEM — AND HE MUST HAVE MURDERED THE COLONEL, TOO!

THE DRY VOICE FROM BEHIND HIM CAUGHT BILL SHAW ABSOLUTELY UNPREPARED.
SERGEANT SHAW! BY ALL THAT'S WONDERFUL! NOW WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING PROWLING ABOUT HERE?
CONFUSED THOUGHTS CLAMOURED IN BILL SHAW'S MIND.
MISTER CROCKER! YOU! I KNOW WHY YOU'RE HERE! A MURDERER, COME TO REVISIT THE SCENE OF HIS CRIME!
A TENSENESS HUNG BETWEEN THE TWO MEN...
MAYBE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, SHAW, BUT I DON'T! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
I NEVER BELIEVED COLONEL RANKIN WAS A TRAITOR AND I WONDERED ABOUT TIM FRASER'S PATROL BEING SHOT IN THE BACK. BUT I THINK I KNOW THE ANSWERS NOW. WHAT DID YOU GET OUT OF IT? THE IRON CROSS?

SHAW'S FURIOUS ACCUSATION WAS MET BY BLAND INDIFFERENCE.

YOU'RE TALKING A LOT OF RUBBISH, SHAW. IF I'D DONE WHAT YOU SAY~ WOULDN'T I KILL YOU NOW?

YOU MIGHT SHOOT ME. BUT I'D GET TO [illegible] I DIED~ I'D GET YOU!

CAPTAIN CROCKER TURNED AND POINTED ALONG THE LINE OF THAT TWO-YEAR OLD COMMANDO ADVANCE.

I THINK YOU WOULD, SHAW BUT I'M NOT GOING TO KILL YOU~AND I DIDN'T KILL FRASER AND HIS PATROL. LOOK / THERE'S THE VILLA SAN MARCO. WE'LL WALK ACROSS. THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW...

AGAIN THE COILS OF TIME UNTWINED. AGAIN MEN WHO WERE DEAD THESE TWO YEARS PAST RETURNED TO GHOSTLY LIFE...

WE CAN'T AFFORD TO LEAVE ANY JERRIES~ANY LIVE ONES, THAT IS. WE'LL GO THROUGH THIS PLACE AND THEN CUT STRAIGHT ON TO CAPTAIN PURTON...

THE VILLA SAN MARCO, CENTRE OF ALL THE MYSTERY OF THIS BATTLE-TORN NIGHT.
QUIETLY NOW, THE JEEP SO MIGHT JUST BE HOLED UP IN THIS RUIN...

MOVING WITH THAT WARY PROWL OF TRAINED COMMANDOS, THE PATROL CLOSED IN ON THE VILLA.
GERMANS THEY HAD EXPECTED, BUT HARDLY A HIGHLY-POLISHED NAZI STAFF CAR ...

COLONEL RANKIN CROUCHED WITH LIEUTENANT CROCKER IN THE LEE OF THE VILLA WALL.
THE HERR GENERAL WAS VERY EXPLICIT ON THAT POINT, RUDOLPH. WE MUST NOT DRAW ATTENTION TO THE VILLA. HAVE YOUR MEN SEAL THE TRAP THOROUGHLY.
JAWOHL, HERR OBERST. BUT THE ENGLANDERS WILL NEVER LAND IN SICILY...

RANKIN AND CROCKER LISTENED TO THE GUTTURAL GERMAN IN FASCINATION. TIM FRASER AND HIS MEN LISTENED — AND UNDERSTOOD NOTHING
WE CANNOT RISK WHAT THE VILLA HOLDS. WHEN THE WAR IS OVER—
WHICHEVER WAY IT GOES, D'YOU MEAN? THE REICH WILL WIN! HITLER HIMSELF IS CONFIDENT OF ULTIMATE VICTORY!

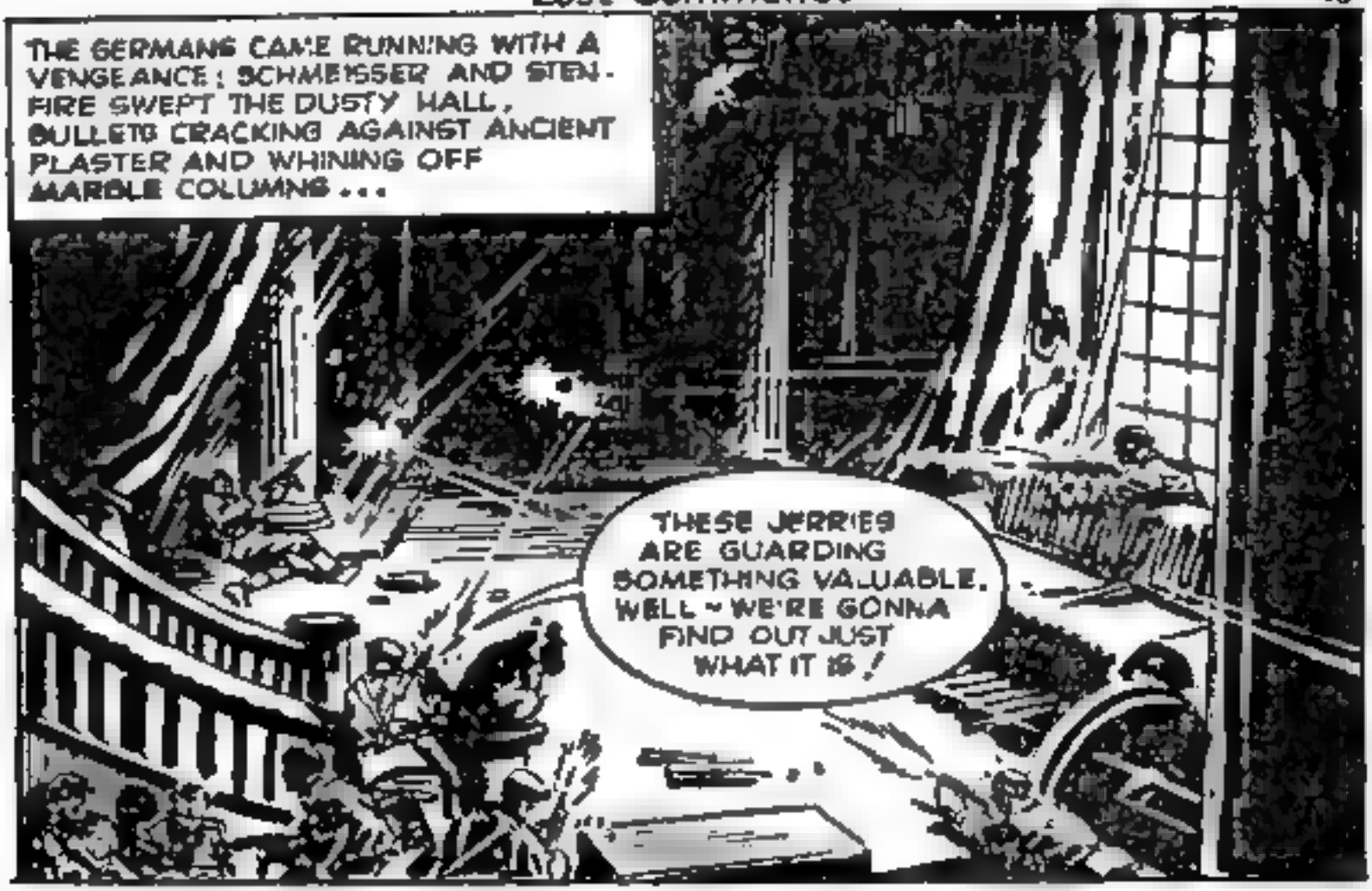
THAT IS SO, RUDOLPH. BUT, EVEN SO— SEAL UP THAT TRAP!
JAWOHL, HERR OBERST. NO-ONE WILL SUSPECT ANYTHING IS BURIED IN THE VILLA OF SAN MARCO!

THAT WAS THE MOMENT COLONEL RANKIN MADE HIS PLAY-
COVER THE HAUPTMANN, CROCKER. LEAVE THE COLONEL TO ME!

TWO STENS POKED FORWARD MENACINGLY...
HANDS UP! ONE FALSE MOVE-AND YOU'RE BOTH DEAD NAZIS!

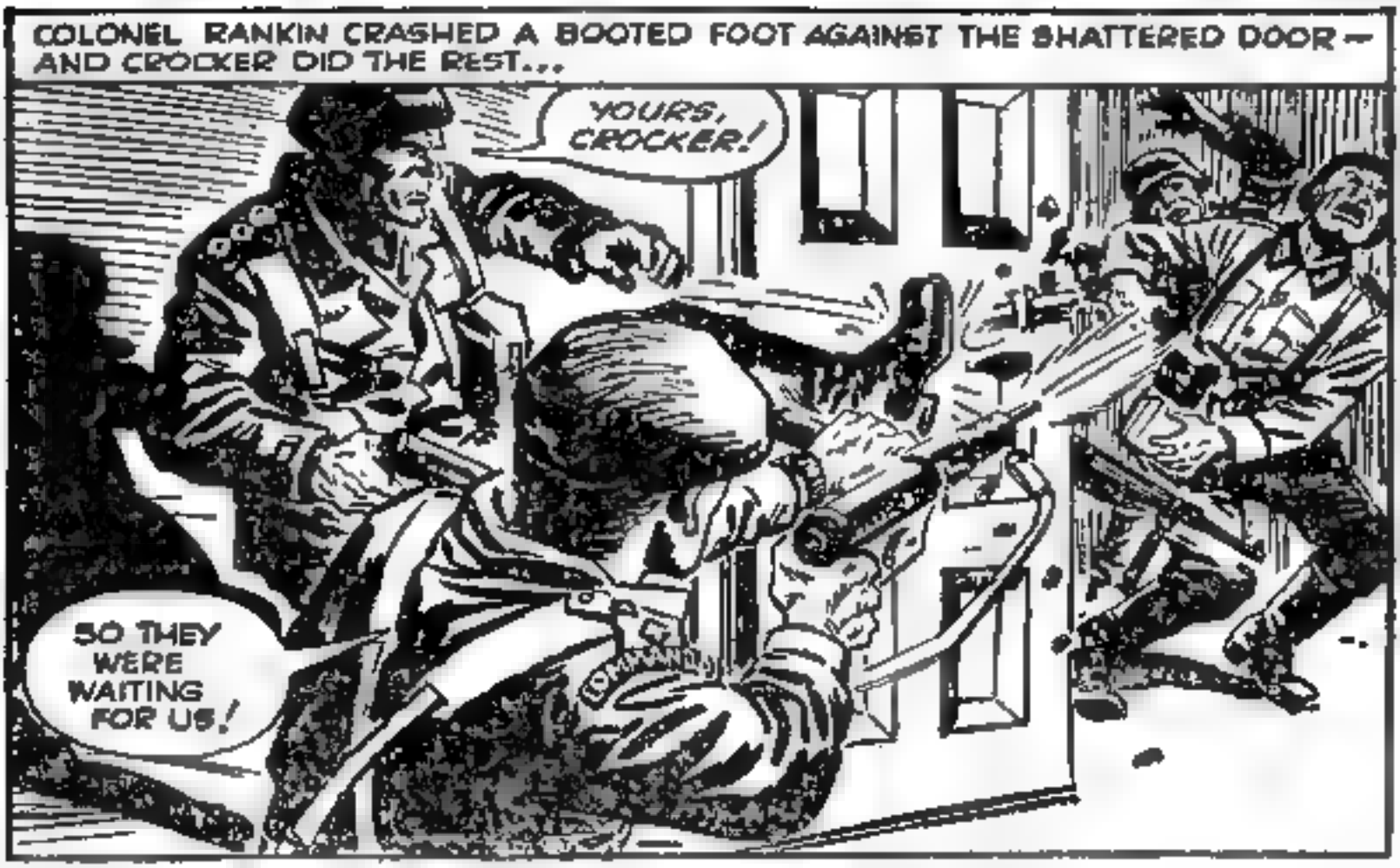
THE OBERST REMAINED RIGID BEHIND THE WHEEL, BUT THE HAUPTMAN, A DEDICATED NAZI, MADE A MOVE...
YOU DUMB CLUCK!
INSIDE, HERR OBERST- AND SCHNELL!

INSIDE THE VILLA SAN MARCO, THE DECAY AND SENSE OF DESOLATION WAS EVERYWHERE. ONCE, THIS HAD BEEN A GAY SEASIDE RESORT HOME, A PLACE OF SUNSHINE AND HAPPINESS...
IF THERE ARE ANY MORE ABOUT, THEY'LL HAVE HEARD THE SHOOTING AND COME RUNNING, SPREAD OUT!


THE GERMANS CAME RUNNING WITH A VENGEANCE: SCHMEISSER AND STEN-FIRE SWEPT THE DUSTY HALL, BULLETS CRACKING AGAINST ANCIENT PLASTER AND WHINING OFF MARBLE COLUMNS...
THESE JERRIES ARE GUARDING SOMETHING VALUABLE. WELL - WE'RE GONNA FIND OUT JUST WHAT IT IS!

IN A FEW VIOLENT MOMENTS, THE LAST GERMAN HAD BEEN DISCOVERED AND PUT OUT OF ACTION.
CHECK EVERYWHERE AND EVERYTHING! IF THERE ARE ANY MORE JERRIES - FLUSH 'EM OUT!
THAT DOOR - IT'S BEEN USED RECENTLY!

THERE WAS ONE QUICK WAY OF OPENING A PADLOCKED DOOR...
OPEN SESAME!


COLONEL RANKIN CRASHED A BOOTED FOOT AGAINST THE SHATTERED DOOR — AND CROCKER DID THE REST...
YOURS, CROCKER!
SO THEY WERE WAITING FOR US!

THEY STARED IN AMAZEMENT AT THE LARGE ROOM BEYOND.
WHAT THE DEVIL? A THEATRE! UP ON THE STAGE— GRAB THEIR GUNS.
THEY'VE BEEN BURYING SOMETHING, SIR.

WE'LL FIND OUT WHAT THIS IS ALL ABOUT AND THEN WE MUST PRESS ON.
CAPTAIN FURTON WILL BE WONDERING WHAT IS HAPPENING — AND THOSE BATTERIES HAVE STILL GOT TO BE SPIKED!

LIEUTENANT LANCE CROCKER FOLLOWED HIS COLONEL UP ON TO THE STAGE AND TOGETHER THEY STARED DOWN INTO THE HOLE ...

TREASURE! TREASURE COLLECTED BY A NAZI GENERAL FROM LOOTED FRENCH NORTH AFRICA—AND PROBABLY FROM ITALIAN CHURCHES, TOO. THE S.S. WERE NO RESPECTERS OF PERSONS OR PLACES.

WELL, WELL! . THE USUAL NAZI LOOT! THIS'LL TAKE SOME SORTING OUT AND RETURNING TO ITS RIGHTFUL OWNERS.

THE GLITTER OF THE GOLD AND PRECIOUS JEWELS WAS REFLECTED IN THE EYES OF COLONEL RANKIN, A MAN BORN IN POVERTY. EVEN IN THE ARMY, HE HAD GAINED RANK AND REPUTATION— BUT NEVER WEALTH.

SUDDENLY, CROCKER SENSED THE TENSION IN HIS COMMANDING OFFICER...

COLONEL! WHAT IS IT, SIR!

WEALTH! UNTOLD WEALTH! ALL DOWN THERE, IN THAT HOLE —FOR THE TAKING!

THE WORDS OF COLONEL RANKIN WERE WHISPERED, AS THOUGH HE BUT BREATHED HIS INNERMOST THOUGHTS.

THE SIGHT OF THE TREASURE HAD DISTRACTED THE COMMANDOS' ATTENTION FOR A BRIEF MOMENT...
YOUR GUNS, KAMERADEN! KILL THE SWINE!
LOOK OUT!

BUT, IN THE MIDST OF THE INSTANTANEOUS VIOLENT EXCHANGE OF FIRE, RANKIN REMAINED ON HIS KNEES, AS IF MESMERISED BY THE SIGHT OF THE LOOT.
I COULD BE INDEPENDENT AT LAST!..
KEEP SHOOTING! THEY DON'T LIKE A REAL FIGHT!

IT WAS ONLY THE CESSATION OF FIRE THAT SEEMED TO BRING HIM TO HIS SENSES...
THROW THEM ALL DOWN THERE. THEN AWAIT MY ORDERS OUTSIDE!

CROCKER STARED COVERTLY AT RANKIN. THE COLONEL HAD CHANGED...
I'VE GOT TO THINK...
SIR! WE MUST PUSH ON TO THE BATTERY. WHAT ABOUT THIS JERRY OFFICER?

COLONEL RANKIN FLUNG THE NAZI LIEUTENANT A PITILESS GLANCE...
HIM? SHOOT HIM AND TOSS HIM DOWN WITH THE OTHERS.
BUT WE CAN'T DO THAT, SIR! THAT'S MURDER!

RANKIN HARDLY SEEMED TO HEAR THE COMMANDO LIEUTENANT'S SHOCKED PROTEST.
CROCKER! STAY HERE AND GUARD THE TREASURE IN THAT HOLE. LET NOBODY IN, UNDERSTAND? NOBODY?
BUT, SIR! THE BATTERY...

THE COLONEL'S REPLY SHOOK CROCKER TO THE CORE.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT BEING POOR MEANS, CROCKER. THIS IS MY CHANCE FOR WEALTH—THE ONLY CHANCE I'VE EVER HAD! I'M NOT LETTING IT GO, D'YOU HEAR? HERR LEUTNANT—COME WITH ME!

INDECISION TORE AT THE LIEUTENANT AS HE WATCHED THE TWO MEN LEAVE THE MACABRE THEATRE.
WHAT CAN I DO? I'LL COVER THIS HOLE AND GET AFTER THEM. I MUST TRY TO GET THE COLONEL THINKING STRAIGHT...

HE WAS ROLLING THE PONDEROUS SLAB ACROSS THE APERTURE IN THE STAGE, WHEN...
THAT'S STEN GUN FIRE! JUST OUTSIDE, TOO!

THE RIPPLING BURST OF FIRE CUT OFF EVEN AS CROCKER RACED OUTSIDE.
NOT A SOUND, BUT THAT WAS A STEN!

A QUICK, FURTIVE MOVEMENT AMONG THE TREES CAUGHT CROCKER'S EYE, HIS STEN WHIPPED UP...
THAT'S THE JERRY LEUTNANT! COME BACK!

CROCKER CHASED THE FLEEING NAZI UNTIL HE LOST HIM IN THE DIM LIGHT. THEN, RELUCTANTLY, HE RETRACED HIS STEPS.
SERGEANT SHAW AND HIS PATROL! I CAN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THE COLONEL. I'LL HAVE TO LIE. HE'LL TURN UP AND THEN I CAN HAVE IT OUT WITH HIM...
COMMANDO
AND SO, ONCE AGAIN, THE MISTS OF TIME FADED AND THERE WAS ONLY CAPTAIN CROCKER TALKING TO SERGEANT SHAW AT THE SCENE OF THAT TWO-YEAR-OLD MYSTERY...
SO YOU SEE, SHAW, I COULD SAY NOTHING. I WAITED FOR THE COLONEL TO RETURN...
BUT HE DIDN'T! HOW DO I KNOW YOU DIDN'T MURDER HIM AND COME BACK FOR THE TREASURE—IF THERE IS ANY TREASURE!

LANCE CROCKER SMILED A TWISTED SMILE. HE, TOO, HAD FELT THE GRIEF AND PAIN AT A RESPECTED MAN SLIDING INTO TOTAL DISHONOUR.
YOU'LL SOON SEE IF THERE WAS ANY TREASURE, SHAW.
I DON'T GET IT! SOUNDS AS IF HE'S TELLING THE TRUTH?

SLOWLY, THE GREAT SLAB MOVED AND PONDEROUSLY SLID TO ONE SIDE. LIGHT STABBED DOWN INTO THE DARK AND DUSTY RECESSES BELOW...
TREASURE? I DON'T SEE ANY TREASURE!
GOOD GRIEF! IT'S GONE! SO THE COLONEL DID COME BACK AND TAKE IT!

DARK SUSPICIONS FORMED AGAIN IN SHAW'S MIND...
SO YOU SAY! THERE NEVER WAS ANY TREASURE, NO LOOTED NAZI WEALTH! THIS WAS JUST A STORY CONCOCTED TO COVER YOUR OWN FAILURE!
NO, SHAW. THE LEUTNANT ESCAPED- YOU HEARD WHAT HE SAID. HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT UNHOLY BARGAIN THE COLONEL MADE WITH HIM? MAYBE, EVEN, IT WAS THE COLONEL WHO SHOT CORPORAL FRASER'S PARTY IN THE BACK!

GINGERLY, THE TWO MEN DESCENDED INTO THE CHAMBER AND PEERED ABOUT. THEN SHAW CRIED OUT...
LOOK! DEAD GERMANS!
THE WORKING PARTY...

THE GRUESOME SIGHT DID NOT DAUNT THE TWO COMMANDOS. THEY HAD SEEN WORSE. THEN CROCKER BENT FORWARD...
PERHAPS THIS WILL PROVE IT, SHAW. THIS GOLDEN CANDLESTICK HIDDEN BY THE CORPSE. ALL THAT IS LEFT OF A FABULOUS TREASURE!
EVERYTHING YOU'VE SAID HANGS TOGETHER~ EXCEPT FOR THE COLONEL!
THE COLONEL WAS A GREAT SOLDIER, SHAW~ BUT HE WAS ALSO A MAN WITH ALL AN ORDINARY MAN'S FAULTS. WHO CAN CONDEMN HIM FOR CRAVING WEALTH WHEN HE ALWAYS HAD NOTHING?
LOOK!

ON THAT NIGHT OF BATTLE, COLONEL RANKIN HAD RETURNED FOR HIS WEALTH, AND THE GREAT STONE SLAB THAT CROCKER HAD POISED MUST HAVE MOVED AND FALLEN, SHUTTING HIM INTO EVERLASTING DARKNESS. *OR HAD HE BEEN AMBUSHED THERE?*

THE REPUTATION OF A COMMANDO LEADER WHO HAD BECOME A LEGEND HAD VANISHED AS SURELY AS THE TREASURE OF SAN MARCO WHICH HE HAD COVETED. GOING BACK INTO THE SUNSHINE, SERGEANT BILL SHAW GLANCED AT LANCE CROCKER—AND WONDERED...

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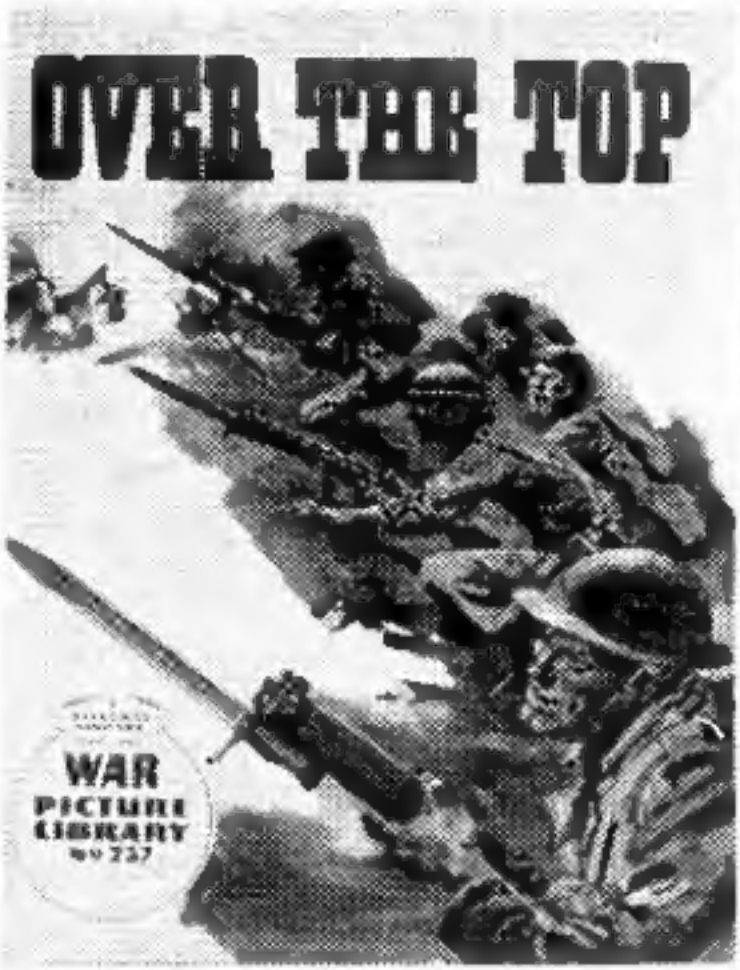

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